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Written statement* submitted by the Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

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Escalation of the farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria's Middle Belt

Since January 2018, an escalation of the farmer-herder conflict predominantly in Nigeria's Middle Belt states has caused the death of more than 1,300 Nigerians making this conflict about six times more deadly than the terrorist attacks of Boko Haram in North-Eastern Nigeria. Unlike this Boko Haram threat, the violence between the predominantly Muslim Fulani herders and the various Christian ethnicities involved in farming hardly gets any recognition by the Nigerian government. Thus, this never-experienced escalation of violence in this conflict also forced more than 300,000 people, mostly farmers, to flee their homes and move to IDP camps with inadequate conditions, while having their farmlands, villages and, therefore, their bases of life destroyed by the Fulani attackers.

In these IDP camps, sufficient supply of food, health care, sanitation and clean water is not guaranteed, which increases the risk of severe diseases. Moreover, since there is no separation of gender in overcrowded housings, especially women and girls are in risk of sexual harassment, exploitation and rape.

The major reason for this escalation stems from the more organized and planned structure of the Fulani attacks on farming villages turning this originally local clash arising from decreasing areas of fertile land and environmental degradation on the one side and from claims about indigenous privileges on the other side into an ethnic and religious conflict about the local supremacy. This new form of violence is accompanied by the use of sophisticated weapons like AK-47 rifles and the formation of ethnic militias with additional, yet to be identified masterminds, who are pursuing their own individual and political goals in this conflict. In consequence, civilians, especially innocent infants and children, are being killed and churches attacked resulting in the murder of clerics and parishioners. Another reason in this multi-layered conflict is a certain political instability in the north deriving from cattle rustling and Boko Haram activities, which additionally drive the Fulani further south.

Despite regular assurances on ending the violence, the government seems to fail in undertaking effective activities in order to control the situation and to protect the civilian population. There is still no security for the people in the conflicting areas, even though the number of police and military units in the different states has been increased. Furthermore, an attempted order to surrender illegal weapons only resulted in a number of 4,000 collected firearms countrywide, whereof only a fraction of 453 was handed in from the Middle Belt states. Consequently, an extensive disarmament of the conflicting parties remains far out of reach. Still, the herdsmen outnumber the police and military forces and are usually better equipped than the police and military as a result of a constant inflow of firearms from the Sahel. Moreover, the Nigerian Air Forces participate in this escalating violence by reportedly having killed at least 35 people in an air raid on several villages in Adamawa state in December 2017. Consequently, attacks by the Fulani herdsmen and reprisals of the farmers are spiraling into continuing violence.

Even though the first suspects of being involved in killings have been arrested, it is still questionable whether and, given the previous pace of investigations, when first trials will be conducted. Thus, perpetrators hardly fear to be arrested or sentenced at court, which spreads the feelings of a certain impunity, weakness of the government and even the intentional ignorance of the conflict among the Nigerian and especially Christian population in the south of the country increasingly resulting in vigilant justice. These sentiments are further supported by contrary statements of political representatives that, at least, indicate a missing accord throughout the governing actors.

Approaching the presidential and parliamentary elections in early 2019, Nigeria steadily falls apart along its conflict lines, while the herder-farmer conflict takes a central role in the future alignment of the country. The conflict might further escalate due to an increasing pressure on land following the population growth in the country and a further expansion of the less fertile Sahel zone forcing the Fulani herders to move even further south. If no actions are taken, even more casualties are to be feared. As a side effect of the conflict, agricultural productio will further reduce

resulting in increasing food prices and creating the hotbed for further violence throughout the whole country, given the fact that the Middle Belt states are considered the agrarian breadbasket of Nigeria.

In order to avoid a possible genocide or civil war, the Society for Threatened Peoples calls on the Human Rights Council to urge the Nigerian Government:

-To establish a productive dialogue between the conflicting parties and stakeholders on a local level.
-To finish the impunity of perpetrators and the hush-ups of information by undertaking consequent investigations and reprocessing of incidents no matter of the ethnicity and religion of the suspects.
-To distribute the promised amount of 10 Billion Naira for the rehabilitation of destroyed villages and farmlands in order to enable the IDPs to return to their homes.
-To investigate the role of the Nigerian military and especially the Nigerian Air Force in attacks on villages and prevent further air raids on villages.